No Going Back: Review of Jacob Polley's The Havocs

The Havocs by Jacob Polley
Miriam Gamble, January 2013

In 'The Tree', one of many sonnets in Jacob Polley's third collection, *The Havocs,* the speaker broods on 'what it means / to remember what was never there'. Suitably enough for a poet obsessed with winter, the tree in question is a Christmas tree – soon to be decked with baubles but, for the duration of the poem, left 'utterly bare', 'a thrilled shade from England's / creaking, uncut, immemorial wood'. The poem recalls Ted Hughes in its lust to discover and maintain the 'irrefutable forest green' of authenticity; however, unlike Hughes, Polley questions the feasibility of such desires, repeatedly denoting them as vision or dream. If the tree was in a Hughes poem, it would raise its head with virile pomp and dominate the surroundings; in Polley's, it is 'propped up' and (although he doesn't say so) clearly not 'uncut'. Against Hughes's at times blustering demonstrations of Ur-ness, Polley casts his own poems as fragile 'baubles', from which, we are to presume, 'bright birds' will not 'hatch and sing unbroken words'. Again and again, quests for indisputable origin and continuity are stopped short, or, in Polley's own terms, havocked.

Polley is a doyen of forms, and *The Havocs* test-runs many – not, as it may seem at first, out of faddishness or a workmanlike setting of technical tasks. Ballads and sonnets coexist with a found poem, a version of the Anglo-Saxon 'The Ruin', riddles, 'afters', poems in voice, and, in a brief hat-tipping to Scotland (where he now lives), a riff on Edwin Morgan's 'Opening the Cage', in which Tom Paulin's sentence 'In poetry, an empty house is always ominous' is de- and reconstructed, worried at until, finally, it yields a statement Polley stands behind: 'Always is an empty house, ominous in poetry.' Similar techniques are employed in the title poem of the collection, where phrases reappear in different contexts, yielding different meanings, and / or have their contents tipped up and jumbled around, as though the words were drawn at random from a tombola barrel:

Because of the rats and the smell, a small business loan enabled me to
start my own
company, offering power washing of the council's havoc receptacles.
Because of the rats and the smell, a small riot enabled me to start my
own havoc,
offering random overturning, throwing and firing of the council's
opportunity receptacles.

Although still connected by syntax, cause and consequence are tenuously related here, as in the ode 'Lunarian' ('I would try to gaff and grapple you, out of courtesy, / for some nights there's more bulge to the seas'). 'Lunarian' may posit that 'tonight unreason separates from reason, / as oil from water, dark from light', but one of the book's greatest strengths lies in the fact that, formal prowess notwithstanding, Polley never separates disorder from order, instead seeing the one as persistently infected by the other. As, in 'Last Night', the 'freedom to want for nothing more' than 'the ordinary night' is compromised by the residual glow of 'books' and 'noise' putatively left behind (the ordering impulse, which extends to 'reading' the night), so, in 'Doll's House', what's meticulously formed and seems static (the house and the poem) is disrupted at the last by the threat of 'sudden little laughter' which 'shakes / a heaven like an empty house / where not a plate nor day will break'.

The book's cover sports the kind of horror movie lettering that shifts slightly before your eyes, suggesting paranormal activity, and the effect at the close of 'Doll's House' is similar: it's its own little Japanese horror in miniature, where what seems safest is freakishly othered, becomes *unheimlich*.

The difficulty involved in composing poems that are impeccably formal but through which you wish chaos to leak should not be underestimated, but this is not the only way in which Polley conscripts forms and turns them to his own purposes. *The Havocs* is a dressing-up box of techniques and traditions, from the pastoral 'vision' ('Following the River') to the Wordsworthian 'lyrical ballad'. 'The Ruin', complete with alliterative patterning, reworks the Anglo-Saxon. Unlike Pound, however (or Hughes with Shakespeare), and despite the fact that the poem is built of the sturdy stuff for which Old English is prized, Polley doesn't 'go there' for linguistic renovation – to infuse the deflated present with the life of the past. Rather, his choice of poem points the other way, emphasising instability and the impossibility of return and connection. 'The Ruin', as its title suggests, is an elegiac dirge for an age *already* gone at the time of the original poem's composition: it mourns, but can neither recover nor replicate 'What was built by great smiths'. As in 'The Tree', the route to unproblematic roots has been lost, the trunk hewn at its base.

Polley, in fact, seems in *The Havocs* like the protagonist of another celebrated Anglo-Saxon lyric, 'The Wanderer' – he's a kind of refugee in the English tradition, to which he turns for support and grounding only to find it an 'empty house'. Like the titular havoc with which he at once does and doesn't self-identify, his own voice is often slippery in the poems, marked up as something which is somehow there but not there. 'Hide and Seek' is a lengthy definition in negative ('That wasn't me in the frogspawn'; 'I wasn't what I didn't say'; 'That wasn't my voice coming from down the well'). In 'Spike', the core of a fruit is described as being 'like nothing, crystallised', 'like light itself grown old'. And in 'Dark Moon', which ventriloquises its subject, the moon says of an earlier phase of brightness:

> But even then, when I worked,
> I hung, my own VACANCY sign;
> a nothing lit up like a something

The many poems in the collection which invoke a personal past raise similar issues. Polley has always been a loving delineator of childhood, and in *The Havocs* it maintains its allure; however, it too is cast as something both irretrievable and of questionable veracity. 'Apples and Pears' enacts a double distancing: 'The steep empty staircase' to the attic in which the child once slept 'falls away', marooning the adult in a rootless world where, as another poem ('First Bike') puts it, he is 'unwise and afraid / in grown-up shoes'. Likewise, the utilisation of slang in the title pulls the language used to map this world further from its point of reference: in growing savvy, the adult paradoxically loses hold of, rather than gripping onto, the 'real' for which he yearns.

'The Dark' goes further. Like 'Lunarian' and 'The Havocs', it works in fragments rather than presenting the organic experience typical of Polley: each stanza details some event or anecdote related to darkness, but there's little continuity between them and no attempt to make them unite. The sixth stanza stakes a series of claims ('I have a photographic memory'; 'my father…was a master forger / of Dutch still lifes') which the seventh then refutes ('I do not have a photographic memory. My father, / who was not a master forger, does'). The poem holds to concrete details, but all the 'memories' evoked are thrown into question by this acknowledgement of deceit. Childhood, like tradition, is no longer something to be unequivocally trusted in or used as ballast; neither the words with which it's summoned up.

Throughout the collection, language is brought under fire – nowhere more so than in 'Virus', which hilariously mimics and blows out of all

proportion the tendency for words to 'trend' and find themselves yoked willy-nilly to things with which they have no truck:

> one of us
> caressed the road headfirst over the handlebars
> of a racing bike and was a long time being retouched
> in an antiseptic caressing house. Heinous
> struck again for the way an unscarred face
> could come back so different

There's more to this, however, than the simple (if wholly understandable) pedantry of one who cares about language hitting out at those who don't. 'Virus' also touches on the darker side of sloppy usage (George Orwell's 'readymade phrases') as political euphemism: 'Overseas, / there was high-yield caressing to be done'; 'Heinous, what's happening in the world / and how softly we're caressed by it.' This poem is a *tour de force* and cuts to the heart of what's going on in the collection as a whole: throughout, Polley seeks and yet denies himself alternative realities to the present as given. He trawls tradition as he trawls childhood (where the father, as in Muldoon, operates as not only a steadying force but one 'whose holding bettered me') in search of something truer, more real and honest, with which to ally. And yet he finds both that such a thing 'was never there' and that the available heirlooms don't quite fit:

> My hands were too small, my fingers
> leaving room my fingers will not fill.

The Havocs is at least in part a state-of-England book, and if Polley doesn't follow in Hughes's footsteps by loudly proclaiming the cure, he does diagnose illness, from which (again unlike Hughes) he doesn't exempt himself. Not all the poems which attend to current 'issues' are amongst his best – 'Langley Lane', for example, rather misses the mark, and 'The News', although its conclusion is stirring ('England's still, / and only some of us are sorry'), feels heavy on its feet at times ('the heat won't go out of the curry'; 'The moon's not sad; the sun won't worry' – since when were the sun and moon *English*?). But the range and ambition of the collection is to be applauded, and many of the poems are superb – true currency that marks Polley out as an original and crucial voice. 'What happens if you turn away?' he asks in 'Doll's House'. The answer, perhaps, is that England stays 'still'. Better that the past won't house him: we need him in the present, creating havoc and refusing to go away.

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